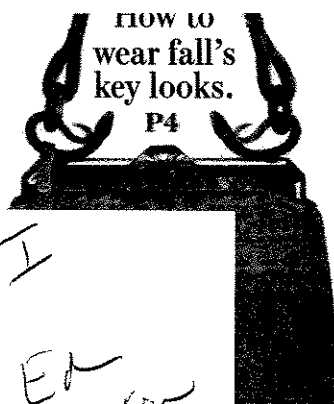


Bryan Helm/Watson & Spierman (photographer, cover & top)



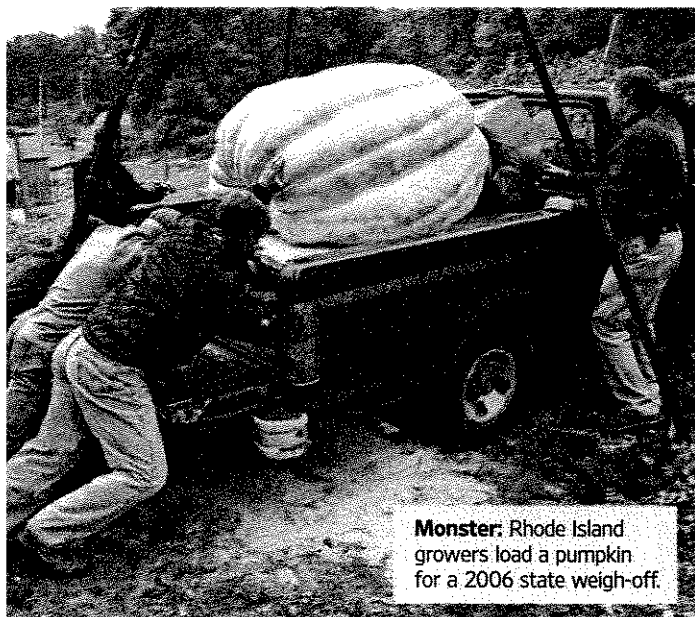
HOW TO
wear fall's
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P4

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t): Bata Plavsic (hair & make-up).

Squash Barrier



Monster: Rhode Island growers load a pumpkin for a 2006 state weigh-off.

e huge—each one from
id 25 feet across at the
planted back to back,
orms pointing toward
; of the garden like the
lips lined up at a dock.

With the brownish-greenish-black
compost tea sloshing in the tank on his
back, Ron stepped into the pumpkin
patch, fired up the sprayer's engine
and blasted out a nutrient-packed mist

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GOLF JOURNAL

Nine Is Enough

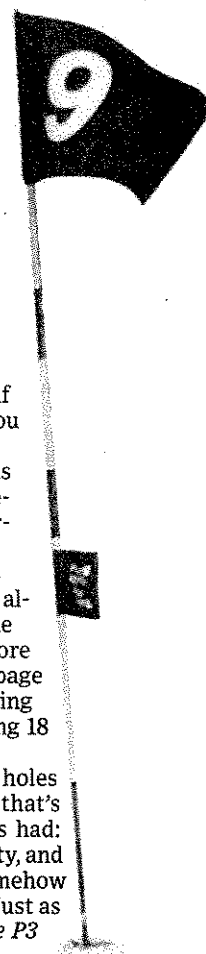
Short courses may lack fancy amenities, but they're often more fun to play than 18-holers

By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT

I RECENTLY PLAYED in a member-guest tournament at a nine-hole golf course in northwest Connecticut. You might think making the same nine-hole loop time after time would grow tedious (each two-person team played five nine-hole matches), but nothing could be further from the truth. For one thing, the course at the Washington Golf Club has two subtly different sets of tees, which alter the driving strategy. For another, the holes were laid out in 1905 and have more style, at least in my eyes, than an 800-page fashion magazine. In fact, I left wondering why so many courses bother maintaining 18 holes when nine can be so much fun.

Eighteen is the standard number of holes for a golf course because, since 1764, that's how many St. Andrews in Scotland has had: nine "out" to the far corner of the property, and nine back "in" to the clubhouse. And somehow this does seem like the proper number. Just as

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Nine Is Enough

Continued from page P1

in baseball the 90-foot distance between bases (established in the 1840s) continues to be just right in balancing offense and defense, so 18-hole rounds in golf are just long enough to produce ebbs and flows and opportunities for redemption, but not so long that golfers usually want to quit early.

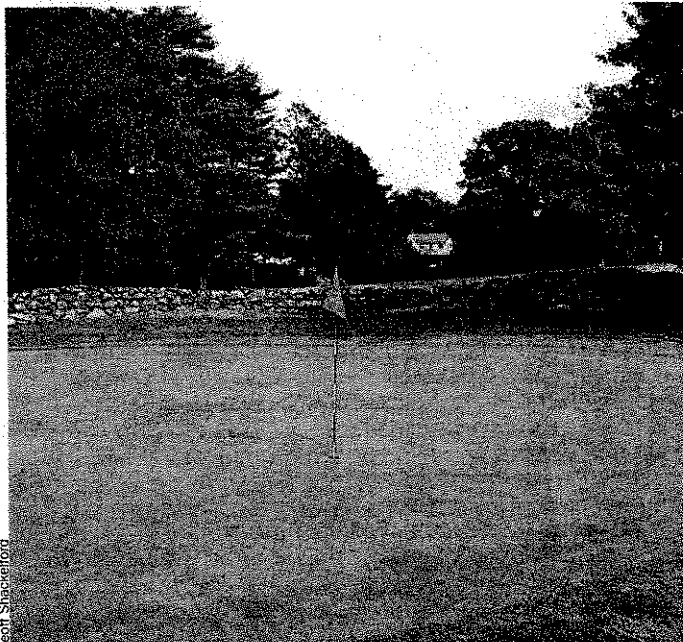
Most of the early courses in this country were nine-holers. The first U.S. Open, in 1895 at Newport Country Club in Rhode Island, was played on a nine-hole course. Back then, there weren't enough golfers, or money, or confidence in the future of the faddish new game to justify many 18-hole extravaganzas. In fact, it wasn't until the 1920s that more than half of all new courses, here and in Great Britain, were 18-hole affairs. Even today, more than a quarter of all U.S. courses are nine-holers, and eight states, mostly in the Midwest, have more nine-hole courses than 18-hole versions, according to the National Golf Foundation.

Shorter courses certainly have some advantages. Most obviously, they are cheaper to build and operate. For smaller communities, nine holes are often all that are necessary. Golfers usually play twice to get their 18 holes in.

For my money, the biggest plus is a natural resistance to fanciness. Eighteen hole courses are inclined to be more competitive. If one course in town brings in an architect to add 500 yards and refashion the bunkers, the others soon feel compelled to do likewise. The same goes for carts with satellite guidance systems or a chef trained in France. Even many 18-hole courses that don't strive to be fancy have a penchant for ironing out the idiosyncrasies in their designs over time, if only to appear more "normal."

Nine-holers, on the other hand, are usually more content with what they are. The best ones, in my experience, view themselves as well-kept secrets.

The Washington Golf Club, for instance, has a pleasant little



Quirky: The ninth green at Marion Golf Course in Marion, Mass.

clubhouse with a spacious porch overlooking the putting green, but no dining service, only a gas grill that the Sunday morning gang uses for post-round burgers and hot dogs. The members range from middle-class to wealthy, but no one seems to want the club to be anything more than it is, a friendly place to gather and play golf. The greens, by the way, roll as true and fast as all but a few of the famous courses in nearby Westchester, N.Y.

WITH SO LITTLE to prove, nine-holers tend not to be afraid of quirk, and I love quirk. One of my favorite places to play with my daughter is an old nine-hole near my mother-in-law's house in Marion, Mass. It was built in 1904, and nothing much has changed since, including the greens fee: \$15 a round. A stone wall has bisected the property since it was farmed. Tee shots on two of the three par 3s are blind because you have to hit over the wall.

It turns out this course, Marion Golf Course, was the first designed by George Thomas, who went on to build Riviera and Bel-Air in Los Angeles. Which is another of the joys of playing nine-hole courses: You never know what little bits of history and

trivia you'll unearth.

Last year, I stumbled upon a nine-hole outside Bellows Falls, Vt., that was built in an abandoned quarry in 1923. Almost nothing about this layout is ordinary, except perhaps the first and ninth holes. The second green is nestled at the bottom of a former kettle pond. The creatively routed third through eighth holes dip into and out of the shallow quarry, now completely overgrown.

Following my round, the club's general manager told me that working people from the area had chipped in to buy the property for a few hundred dollars after the quarry closed, and had designed and helped build the course themselves. Today, the non-profit Bellows Falls Country Club is open to the public. I paid \$14 for my nine-hole loop.

A lot of golfers keep life lists of courses played, usually focusing on famous, top-100-type destinations. I keep such a list myself. Still, there is nothing better than roaming New England, especially when the fall foliage is in full color, seeking out quirky old nine-holers, to remind you of how much fun this ancient stick-and-ball game can be.

Email me at golfjournal@wsj.com.



Tiger Woods
Defending Champion

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